

# REPORT OF THE FRIENDS' MISSION TO RUSSIA

*“A Living Concern of the Society”*

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¶ *The following considered statement was presented to Meeting for Sufferings on Friday, Sept. 7, 1951, by the seven members of the Mission to Russia.*

At the outset of this report to Meeting for Sufferings and to Friends generally, we give thanks to God for making possible at this time a Quaker mission of peace and good will to the Soviet Union, and for the sense of His presence and His guidance which accompanied us throughout our visit. We went to Russia as the result of a living concern of the whole Society of Friends and we felt ourselves constantly surrounded by the loving care of Friends and, indeed, of well-wishers in all parts of the world. We would acknowledge, too, with deep gratitude the friendly and receptive spirit towards ourselves and our message shown everywhere by those whom we met in the Soviet Union.

We are anxious not to exaggerate what we were able to achieve in a relatively short visit and in face of the great difficulties which beset the making of a true peace between the Soviet Union and the countries of the "West". But we are confident that our going was rightly ordered and that in the event the visit was abundantly justified. However the tangible results may be estimated now or later, we are sure that this direct personal contact between representative British Friends and persons of varying standing in the Soviet

Union was in the purpose of God, and cannot fail to promote in some measure the mutual understanding and friendship between peoples which His peace demands.

At the beginning of our visit we were given the opportunity of telling our hosts, the Soviet Peace Committee, something of the faith and practice of Friends. We bore witness to our belief in God and His purpose in the world, to the eternal values which we believe to be His attributes and which have been shown most clearly in the life, the teaching and the death of Jesus Christ. We spoke to them of love, truth, sincerity, generosity; of freedom; of the value of the individual, however afflicted, mistaken or depraved; of Christianity as a way of life. Subsequently and as way opened we sought to make this message the foundation of our contribution to the many discussions we were privileged to have.

We went to Moscow with a twofold purpose which we had made known in advance and were constantly emphasizing during our stay. We hoped that our visit would in some degree serve to increase understanding between the peoples of the Soviet Union and Great Britain, and contribute, however modestly, to the improved relationships and the positive and peaceful agreements between the Government of the Soviet Union and the Governments of the "West" on which the hope of peace so largely depends. We undertook

willingly, therefore, in pursuit of the first purpose, visits to centres of art, of culture and of industry reflecting various facets of the life and activity of the old and the new Russia, which were generously and capably arranged for us by our hosts. On our own initiative but with the willing co-operation of our hosts, and with the second purpose specially in view, we sought and obtained interviews with representative persons in Church and State, in academic life and in the Press, with whom we could share our concern for a true peace and for the constructive and co-operative actions which are essential for its fulfilment.

Our visits are described in detail in various separate articles and documents. They were confined to Moscow and its environs, to Leningrad and to Kiev, to a relatively small portion, that is, of the vast area which goes to make up the 16 republics of the Soviet Union. But they covered treasured monuments and museums of the Russian past which are being restored and maintained with infinite care, as well as the characteristic institutions of the Soviet present. They ranged from factories to a prison, from museums and monasteries to the new Metro in Moscow, from a collective farm and a coal mine to newspaper offices and the Institutes of the Academy, from the ancient cathedrals and palaces of the Kremlin to the modern palaces and parks of Rest and Culture, from the old home of the Tolstoys to the apartment blocks of the new housing schemes. They brought us into welcome touch with superintendents, curators, managers, doctors, engineers and workers who were tireless in their service to us on these occasions, and all of them filled with the sober

but unmistakable pride in the national achievements of their people, both past and present, which typifies the Soviet citizen of today. We were impressed by the scale of the achievements of revolutionary Russia in developing and modernising a vast and still relatively primitive country and in dealing with the added burdens imposed by a peculiarly destructive war. But we recognised how much of this immense task has still to be performed and how great in this respect, at least, is the stake which both Government and people have in the avoidance of military conflict or even an unlimited armaments competition with the "West".

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Our more formal discussions on the problems of peace and international understanding involved us in talks with our hosts, the Soviet Peace Committee, and their local groups in Leningrad and Kiev, with Mr. Kairov, Minister of Education in the Russian Federal Republic, with Academician Grecov, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chamber of Nationalities, with the heads of the International Department of the Trades Union organisation of the U.S.S.R., with the Editors of the influential Moscow *Literary Gazette* and of the recently-established English-language fortnightly magazine *News*, with members of the Academy of Sciences, with the leaders in Moscow and Kiev of the Baptist-Evangelicals, the largest Protestant religious group in the Soviet Union, with the Patriarch Alexius and the Metropolitan Nikolai of the Russian Orthodox Church, and, in a meeting lasting several hours, with Deputy Foreign Minister Jacob Malik—to which last world-wide attention has

been drawn. We had much valued opportunities of discussing the problems of "East"- "West" understanding and the purposes of our mission with the British and Burmese Ambassadors, with the Chargé d'Affaires at the Embassy of the Chinese Peoples' Republic and last, but by no means least, with Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, the Indian Ambassador, who gave us much sympathetic encouragement in our task. But we were also able to discuss our central concerns with equal frankness, and more informality, with individual Russians we met, such as the principal of a village school near Kiev and, not least, with the small group of interpreters who were with us constantly and who discharged their duties with such courteous friendliness, sincerity and competence.

We were brought into touch with our fellow-Christians in the Soviet Union in acts of worship together and in sympathetic consideration, around a table, of our concern for truly peaceful relations between peoples and governments. We would wish to be able to communicate to Friends and others something of the spiritual experience which was ours in the two religious services it was our privilege to attend.

We were called somewhat unexpectedly to take part in an ordinary week-night service in the Baptist Church in Moscow, where a congregation of some eighteen hundred persons, unaware that we were to attend, crowded the aisles and galleries of the church. Leslie Metcalf, invited with little notice to speak to the congregation, explained briefly in Russian the purpose of our mission, conveyed the Message of Good Will to all peoples sent from London Yearly Meeting of Friends a

year ago, and brought us all, Russians and Britishers alike, to our feet in a few moments of silent intercession before God that His peace might come into the world.

On another occasion we shared with some 25,000 Russian people in the highly ritualistic service of commemoration of St. Sergius in the Monastery at Zagorsk, which he founded five centuries ago, conducted by the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Church in Russia and in the adjacent countries of Eastern Europe. Unfamiliar and perhaps uncongenial to us as Friends was the ritual of Zagorsk, but there, and more especially in the simple Church of the Baptists in Moscow, we were brought with our Russian brothers and sisters into a sense of the presence of the Living God, and thereby into a unity with them which transcended political differences.

As our conversations showed, these differences are formidable, not least because the approved Russian Churches have obtained their freedom of religious observance at the cost of any independent judgment where the external or internal political aims of the Soviet Union are concerned. But the Churches are repositories of a deep religious instinct which still significantly characterises the Russian people and which may well by its persistence confound those who look to the complete secularisation of the Soviet Union. Be that as it may, there is clearly laid upon Christians everywhere the duty of reaching out constantly in prayer and active friendship towards their fellow-Christians in the Soviet Union, in faith that in a growing spiritual unity they may together serve the pressing cause of peace. This is the foundation, we are sure, of the continuing action



which, stimulated by our visit, Friends in particular will desire to take in order to forge stronger links between the Russian peoples and the peoples of the "West".

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Public references to the Quaker mission, both before and since our visit, have stressed those features of the delegation which differentiated it from other delegations. As an avowedly Christian group representing a religious society and coming from a non-Communist country, we were different from other post-war, or even pre-war, missions to the Soviet Union. Whatever motive some may care to attribute to this, the fact is that we were freely accepted for what we were and are by the Soviet Government and by the Soviet Peace Committee who were our hosts. And tribute must be paid to the indiscriminating generosity with which, despite our peculiarities, we were everywhere received and to the care that was taken to satisfy wherever possible our preferences as to what we saw and whom we met.

For we were not only unusual in the sense that the inspiration for our visit was confessedly a religious one. We went in the spirit and against the background of the consistent testimony of Friends against all war and violence and as dissenters from reliance upon military power and armed preparation, whether practised by the Soviet Union or the "West". So placed, we were the better able to make the objective appraisal of the responsibility of both sides for peaceful actions which is indispensable to those who would mediate in the conflict between "East" and "West" and seek to promote constructive agreements between them.

And in this situation we recognised once again how much Friends owe in their peacemaking to-day to the faithful witness of earlier Friends for which we ourselves could claim little credit, but which prepared the way for us and, we are sure, powerfully eased our task.

One of our major purposes in going to the Soviet Union was our concern to examine with representative Russians, in a spirit of good will, the obstacles, both in their practice and in the practice of the "West", to the genuine understandings and practical agreements between peoples and governments which peace demands. We are grateful for the opportunities for this service which were opened to us. In all these conversations we sought to stress the better aspects of the mind and spirit of the "West" and of its governments, largely hidden hitherto from the Russian people by a propaganda of hostility to Western governments and all their works. We underlined the crucial importance of spreading a spirit of peace and good will between peoples and nations and, while freely confessing our own shortcomings, we challenged in friendly candour the acts and omissions of the Soviet Government and Soviet organs of information which seemed to us to prejudice even the peaceful co-existence of "East" and "West" which is the declared aim of Soviet policy.

So in meeting the newspaper editors we called attention to the more flagrant distortions of conditions in "Western" countries or of the actions of "Western" governments, appearing in Soviet publications of all kinds, and appealed for the more accurate information on "Western" life and culture, and the restraint upon editorial comment, which would serve a greater understanding

and a positive co-operation between the nations. So in our talks with leading Russian Christians we tried to explain, if not to justify, the unresponsive attitude of "Western" religious leaders to declarations coming from religious groups in the U.S.S.R. on the problems of peace, expressed in controversial political terms. We sought to encourage, on the contrary, the coming together of Christian leaders from "East" and "West" on the basis of their common religious allegiance and for the purpose of fostering the atmosphere of good will in which the negotiations of governments could be brought to fruitful conclusions. So in our lengthy interview with Deputy Foreign Minister Malik we pleaded for an opening-up of opportunities of contact by visits and by correspondence between Russian and "Western" peoples, for a curb on embittering propaganda and for positive contributions by the Soviet Government towards a solid inter-governmental co-operation both inside and outside the United Nations.

These submissions were perhaps not as fully reported by radio and Press to the Russian people as we would have wished, but they were invariably received with patience and courtesy by those to whom they were addressed. We did not expect and, of course, were not given assurances that what we thought it right to propose would become Soviet policy today or tomorrow. Authorities everywhere, as we have reason to know, move slowly and totalitarian authority, in particular, reserves changes of policy for the highest level. Moreover, as we too often forget, there is a Russian case—a case put to us with equal candour and directness—which has to be met if

mutual confidence is to be created and agreed solutions attained. And, finally, recent years have built up a formidable prejudice and suspicion between "East" and "West" which only time, patience and persistent effort can disperse.

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Reflecting on our encounters and exchanges in the Soviet Union and, in particular, on the responsibilities which face governments and peoples in the "West", including ourselves, if tensions are to be lessened and the hopes of peace confirmed, we feel led to stress four considerations. First, the need in confronting Communism to place first the obligation to make a reality of our own Christian and democratic professions, responding, that is, to the Communist challenge not by a critical and defensive reaction but by a positive resolve to become better Christians and better democrats.

Secondly, the obligation, while fearlessly rejecting what we deem to be wrong or misguided in the policies and practices of the Soviet Union, to recognise what is good in its aspirations and achievements and, in particular, the solid progress which has been made, despite an exacting war, towards the economic and social betterment of the mass of the people.

Thirdly, the need in assessing the actions and omissions of the Soviet Government to avoid self-righteousness and, above all, the expression in ourselves of the temper and practices we deplore and oppose in them. We may judge that responsibility for the development of tension between "East" and "West" over recent years rests largely with the Soviet Union and its associates. Moreover, situations of tension foster restrictive practices which will disappear

only when the tension itself is dispersed by positive agreements. But in criticising and deploring, for example, tendentious reporting in the U.S.S.R. about the "West" or the barriers which the Soviet Union interposes between its peoples and the people of the "West", let us recognise that similar extravagances about the Soviet Union are not infrequent in "Western" newspapers and that similar and increasing barriers are being established here.

Fourthly, we would lay special emphasis on the importance of resisting moods of scepticism where the peace declarations and approaches of the Soviet Union are concerned. There is no question of the eagerness of the ordinary Russian for an assured international peace, and in him the desire is perhaps the more conscious because peace is so obviously essential to the immense tasks of reconstruction and modernisation which his country is facing. It is yet to be seen whether the Soviet Government—as other governments—is ready to make the practical contributions which peaceful agreements between "East" and "West" require. But the time may well be approaching when the sincerity of the declared purpose of Western rearmament—namely to make possible effective negotiations—is going to be tested. In any case we can testify from our experience to the more conciliatory temper towards the "West" which prevails in the Soviet Union today, and to the persistence with which the necessity of peace and of peaceful understandings between the major Powers is being commended to the Soviet people. To close our hearts and minds to these signs, to reject all approaches without reflection or without the presentation of positive

alternative proposals where we think that those presented to us are inadequate, is surely to betray the deepest need and deepest hope of peoples everywhere for a world at peace.

As we are able we shall endeavour to share with Friends and others the clearer appreciation and understanding of the Soviet Union and its people which we have gained from our visit, all too limited though the visit was for this purpose. We are concerned, too, to commend to the people of our own country and other countries in the "West" the main conditions as we see them, and as outlined above, of effective peacemaking in the situation which exists between the Soviet Union and the "West" today. But here, we feel, the responsibility falls on the Society as a whole and cannot be met unless all Friends are concerned and active in its discharge. Particular steps to maintain the contacts, and to follow up the openings we have made in the course of our visit, will no doubt be undertaken by the East-West Relations Committee, the Peace Committee, the Committee on Christian Relationships or other appropriate committees of the Society, and we shall hope to give them all the assistance in our power. But if the service which was opened up to the Society of Friends, and fulfilled by us on its behalf, is to yield the increase which God surely wills, Friends everywhere must dedicate themselves afresh to His ministry of reconciliation in a gravely divided world.

(Signed) MARGARET A. BACKHOUSE,  
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*London, 24th of Eighth Month, 1951.*

*(Any inquiries in regard to this statement  
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